

JUN 28 1916

DENVER

PUBLIC LIBRARY

The Student-Writer

A Little Talk Every Month with Those
Interested in the Technique of Literature

Published from the Workshop of William D. Howells,
1835 Champa Street, Denver, Colorado.

Vol. I—No. 1

260234

January, 1916

PUBLIC LIBRARY

OF THE

CITY OF DENVER

25 cents

7-28-16

CAN WE AFFORD TO BE ORIGINAL?

UNCEASING, goes up the editorial cry: "Give us something new!" The student writer's motto is to please. Hearing the oft-repeated plea for originality, he does his best to satisfy it. His stories fairly reek with novelty. He submits his offerings persistently but without success. Finally comes the long anticipated acceptance. And, to his genuine surprise, it is for what he deemed a hackneyed little tale, hardly worth the postage required to send it out.

The budding author is disconcerted by this, but he still retains his faith in the fetish of novelty. He explains the failure of his strikingly original stories and the acceptance of the simple little hack-novelty, by the philosophic reflection that accidents will happen.

Further experience, however, convinces him that this was not an accident. The more novel his conceptions, the more likely they are to come back, while the occasional acceptances are for well written old stories, containing perhaps a degree of novelty in the matter of setting, or a slightly new plot twist.

One of my correspondents whose work frequently appears in good magazines calls this the "dull thud" type of story. In commenting on one of his own tales which appeared in The Saturday Evening Post, he observes that he has come to the conclusion that one of the strongest elements of salability—if not the strongest—is obviousness. The story in the Post is held up as a hilarious example of the "dull thud" type. "I believe it is true," he adds, "editors want the reward-of-virtue stuff applied thickly and in words of one syllable. I find the same trouble with every story. If I twist the plot a little I can't sell it. If I retwist it to the obvious, it sells on the next trip."

If such conclusions were exceptional—but they are not. The same bewildered comment has come from dozens of writers who are beginning to break into print. The first impulse of the hopeful author on making this discovery, is to assert that the editors either don't know what they want, or don't know originality when they see it.

This attitude is, of course, unjust to the editors. Their statements of what they want and the evidence of what they accept are more reconcilable than may appear on the surface. In fact, they are entirely reconcilable.

For one thing, the attempt to secure originality of plot generally results in excess of subtlety. Some of the most original writers I know succeed in marketing very little of their work. Much of it is exquisite artistically—but a subtle intellect is required to appreciate the theme and its development. Few magazines that are successful enough commercially to pay fair rates can afford to ignore entirely the every-day reader. General Reader is intelligent, but he cannot be said to revel in subtleties. What he likes is an interesting story, well told. If the writer has visualized his characters clearly and placed them in interesting situations, friend Reader does not care whether or not the basic plot is old. Neither does the editor. In fact, if the plot is of the familiar "reward of virtue" type, it may make a stronger impression than otherwise, because readers know that it is true—true to life and human nature. The story based on an entirely original theme may leave him doubting. It deals with motives and reactions that are probably out of his experience.

Tenuity and subtlety of plot are too frequently the chief characteristics of novel stories. The editor distrusts these as the merchant distrusts a new, unadvertised brand of cigars. A ready sale exists for the old brands, and naturally, he does not wish to throw them out of his show case, the magazine, to make room for untried goods to which the public must be educated.

However,—mark the distinction,—the shopkeeper, as well as the editor, knows the importance of novelty as a means of stimulating business. Thus, he may augment the appeal of his old reliable brands by including with every sale a profit sharing coupon, or by an attractive window display featuring a standard product. The merchant is likely to be distrustful of a perfume put out by a new company. But suppose the manufacturer of a standard brand of toilet soap should put this same perfume on the market under his trade mark. The merchant is pretty certain to stock up with it. Why? He knows that the combination of something new, in connection with the old reliable firm name, is pretty certain to capture the public.

Magazine catering is subject to the commercial laws that govern any other business. The editor knows that certain lines of fiction goods—certain old plots, for example—can be relied upon. He makes them the foundation of his business. But he also knows that new ideas in connection with the selling of these plots are vitally necessary. Hence the cry for novelty.

"Give us new ideas for selling Latherine soap," cries the manufacturer. "Give us new ideas for selling the old reliable plot," echoes the editor.

We may respond by devising a new and attractive box for the marketing of the old soap, or by devising a new setting for the old plot—if it has been confined to the Tropics, shift the scene to the North Pole. We may respond by inventing a new and fragrant scent for the toilet soap, or by giving the old plot a new significance. We may respond to the manufacturer's demand by employing a standard article as a premium to introduce an entirely new product, or we may satisfy the editor by using an old plot to carry across a more subtle sub-plot of undoubted originality.

Perhaps it is now clear that when editors say: "Be original," they do not mean: "Devise far-fetched novelties for readers whose concern is with the commonplaces of every day life." They do mean: "Devise a good strong plot, with plenty of significance; be sure that your materials are fresh, not shopworn, and wrap them up in fresh, up-to-date language, instead of using old characters, old incidents, and old figures of speech."

The writer who knows his business can "put across" any time-worn plot by letting it germinate in his mind until the possibilities become new to him. It is not the old plot that editors reject, so much as the old way of presenting it. You do not object to fruit salad for dinner, on the ground that you have eaten fruit salad before; neither do you find uninteresting the "reward of virtue" plot because you have read it elsewhere. But you would feel aggrieved, if you recognized in this salad the "left-overs" from a former meal.

Variety in our literary diet is always welcome—an occasional innovation in the manner in which our fiction potatoes are cooked. But in some form or other, we can eat and relish the same old potatoes every day. Writers and cooks alike need fresh materials—this is more essential than that the materials be of a new kind, to which the consumer's appetite must be educated.

Certain plots, it is true, have so cloyed the palates of readers that they have become unwelcome in editorial offices. So also certain sweets served at every meal cause us to sicken and want no more of them. As a result, we have the ban, or the near ban, on the triangle story, the cub reporter story, and others. Yet even these can be employed in moderation.

Be moderate then, in seeking originality. The editorial demand is for something new, in spite of occasional appearances, and the writer who studies the situation will soon learn to steer a safe course between the rock of stale triteness on one hand and too extreme novelty on the other.

HAVE A STANDARD OF STYLE.

IT GOES without saying that manuscripts submitted by student writers should be correct in punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and all mechanical details. Often, however, it is difficult to determine what is correct. Comparatively few standard publications, it may be noted, have the same rules of typography. One editor is an exponent of the simplified spelling, and the pages of his magazine bristle with "tho" and "thru" and other comparatively new forms. One magazine would write the phrase, "The Pennsylvania Railroad enters New York State," while another would publish it, "The Pennsylvania railroad enters New York state." One would say, "November 3rd," another "November 3d," another "November 3."

There are dozens of such points of difference, which frequently cause the writer confusion. It is impossible to satisfy everyone, when frequently the highest authorities differ. Nor is it necessary. If you submit a manuscript that does not come entirely within the office style, in case of acceptance, the changes will be made in the editorial room. However, it is advisable to have a definite standard, and it should be a conservative, rather than an ultra-modern standard which will find comparatively few sympathetic editors. Thus, in prose work, use "through," and "though"; put the apostrophe in "don't" and "can't," even though you will find magazines that spell them "thro" and "dont."

The rules quoted below are from the United Typothetae of America style book, used by a majority of printing offices in the United States as an aid to standardization. They touch chiefly points which difference of opinion, or lack of opinion, have made it necessary to standardize. The standard is a good one for writers, because it is consistent with that which will be followed by the majority of compositors in setting a piece of work, unless they are otherwise instructed. A manuscript prepared in accordance with these rules will be in good taste, even when submitted to a magazine that has a different style.

The "up" style is that which favors capitalizing in such cases as "The Southern Railroad," "Missouri River," etc., which in the "down" style would be written, "Missouri river," "Southern railroad," etc.

It should be remembered that this is only one of several accepted standards. When a manuscript consistently prepared according to some different recognized authority comes into the office of The Student-Writer for criticism, it is not altered to fit the standard we have selected merely for general convenience.

An Aid to Standardization 60234

CAPITALIZATION.

The office style is down except when special instructions to the contrary are given. Wayne county, Clyde river, New York Central railroad, state, president, etc. But capitalize the full corporate title when it is given: as, The Chicago & North-Western Railroad Company.

Capitalize words designating definite regions: as, the Orient, the boundless West, the Gulf Coast. Lower-case eastern New York, northern Maine, etc.

Capitalize names of important events and things: as, the Reformation, the Revolution, the Middle Ages, the Union, the Government.

Capitalize the names of political parties: as, Republican, Democratic, etc.

Capitalize titles of nobility when referring to specific persons: as, the Prince of Wales.

Capitalize titles preceding names: as, President Roosevelt, Doctor Jones; but not the president of the Erie railroad.

Capitalize specific titles: as, Thank you, Professor; the Colonel will soon be here.

Capitalize Church, when used as opposed to the world.

Capitalize the principal words and the last word in titles of books, plays, lectures, pictures, and newspaper and magazine articles.

Capitalize fanciful names given to states, cities, etc.: as, the Keystone state; the Crescent city.

Capitalize First ward, Fifth street, Third regiment, etc.

In compound words capitalize each word, if it would be capitalized when standing alone.

Put a. m. and p. m. in lower-case.

Use capitals for genus and lower-case for species, as in *Staphylococcus pyogenes*, *Bacillus coli communis*, etc.

COMPOUNDS.

Fractions, when both numerator and denominator are less than twenty-one, should be compounded: as, one-half, three-tenths, etc. But when the word is used in speaking of a specific thing, omit the hyphen: as, One half of my page is leaded brevier and the other half solid six-point. When the numerator or denominator exceeds twenty, omit the hyphen: as, twenty-five thirty-seconds; fifteen sixty-fourths.

Use hyphens in all cases such as the following: Two-inch board, three-year-old colt, well-known man, 500-volt current, etc. Two words used as a noun should either appear solid or with the hyphen, and it is not always easy to decide which form is the better: as, blood-vessels, germ-cells, sick-room, dining-car, finger-nail, composing-room, press-room. In a general way it may be said that when one or both words are of one syllable only, the tendency is to join them without the hyphen, while if they are of two or more syllables the hyphen is often used; but the above examples show that the usage is by no means uniform.

Make today, tomorrow, etc., one word.

DATES.

In dates omit d, th, and st, when the year is given: as, October 9, 1906. Use them when the year is omitted: as, the work must be shipped October 20th.

Make it 2d and 3d, not 2nd and 3rd.

In giving a series of two or more years express them thus: 1906-07, not 1906-7.

POSSESSIVE CASE.

Singular nouns ending in s take an apostrophe and another s to show the possessive case. King James's reign; Jones's scales; Bass's ale; Chambers's encyclopedia.

PUNCTUATION.

The conjunction does not take the place of the comma in a series of words. "John, James, and Thomas are here;" "black, red, blue, and yellow were the colors selected;" are the correct forms.

Do not use a period after roman numerals, except when they mark paragraphs or other divisions.

Words and phrases inclosed in marks of parenthesis are to be punctuated according to the sense, and not by a set rule. Sometimes punctuation-marks are used before the first curve and inside the last one; sometimes but one mark is needed, in which case it will follow the second curve; sometimes no marks at all are required.

Dashes are often used to set off a parenthetical clause. When they are, and when a comma would be placed after the word immediately preceding the first dash were the clause omitted, insert the comma, and also use the same point just before the last dash. If no mark would be used were the parenthetical clause omitted, then none is required with it.

When a line closes with a colon do not use a dash also.

SPELL OUT.

Spell out the names of the months.

Spell out ages: as, twelve years.

Use figures in statistics: as, Of 152 operations, 76 died and 76 recovered.

In general, numbers containing less than three figures are to be spelled out, though when they occur in groups of three or more, use figures.

Spell out indefinite amounts.

Numbers containing fractions or decimals should be put in figures, as also should numbers denoting per cent.

Time of day should be put in figures, using a period between hours and minutes and a colon between minutes and seconds: as, 2.30 p. m.; 2:10 class. Periods of time, ages, and the like, must be spelled out: as, twenty-four hours, ten hours, etc.; except that when they occur in groups of three or more, use figures.

Spell out county, street, avenue.

QUOTATIONS.

Periods and commas following the last word of a quotation always precede the quotation marks. The other points precede them when the whole sentence is quoted, and follow them when the last word or clause is quoted.

ABBREVIATIONS.

Abbreviate military and civic titles when preceding a full name: as, Dr. John Smith; Gen. U. S. Grant. Spell them out when they do not precede a full name: as, Doctor Smith; Colonel Bryan.

Abbreviate Company when character & is used: as, A. J. Johnson & Co. When short & is not used, spell out Company: as, Lyons Printing Company.

Abbreviate names of states and territories following towns, except Alaska, Idaho, Iowa, and Utah.

Etc., not &c.

SPELLING.

Omit the final s in afterward, toward, upward, downward, etc.

Omit the final te in toilet.

Use er in diameter, fiber, meter, millimeter, centimeter.

Center, theater, etc., are the correct forms.

Use technique, not technic.

Use disk, not disc.

Spell dulness, fulness, instalment, etc.

About Literary Criticism:

Some conclusions I have reached through preparing several thousand letters of advice for student writers.

COMPETENT CRITICISM consists not of a summary of the demerits of a particular story, nor yet, of that flattery which is sometimes doled out as criticism. Both methods are easy, and they may pay the critic from a commercial standpoint; but they are of little service to the writer. To be worth paying for, a criticism should be stimulating and encouraging, helpful and kindly, and above all, constructive; but it should not arouse false hopes which may result in eventual discouragement.

The measure of success that has come to me in criticism work may be attributed chiefly to a strong desire to discover the hidden value that must lurk in every manuscript. If the writer had not had something worth saying, he would not have been impelled to creative effort. However crudely or vaguely expressed, the worth-while thought is bound to be there. Constructive criticism should locate this and show the author how to bring it to the surface.

Oftentimes, a poorly told story contains possibilities of which the author failed to make the most. Well directed, specific advice will help to make such a story salable. Not every manuscript can be brought up to the salable standard by criticism; but every criticism should, at least, help the writer to produce better work in the future.

METHODS.—The natural result of these conclusions is that I should have developed a system of criticism which includes three viewpoints. First, I ask: "What would be the general reader's impression of this story?" Second: "What would be the editor's opinion; what weakness would he find; what good features?" And third, the question: "If this manuscript were mine, what would I do with it? What changes in the plot, construction, narration, and style would I make before attempting to submit it?" For the time being, the manuscript becomes my own—something upon which I must do my very best work. The result of this detailed study goes to the writer in the form of a constructive criticism.

My methods of instruction have "proved up." Hundreds of letters from writers have assured me that they found in them what they desired. On the following page are a few from my files:

Willard E. Hawkins,

Workshop of THE STUDENT-WRITER, 1835 Champa Street,
Denver, Colorado.

Service Covered by the Workshop of The Student-Writer:

**Criticism of Individual Manuscripts :: Typing
Literary Revision :: Writers' Stationery Supplies
An Effective Short Story Course.**

(Note.—I do not exploit the names of students; but these extracts from letters which have been written to me in response to letters of criticism, are representative of many in my possession.)

Your lesson-letter has been received, and I wonder if it is out of order for me to congratulate you on your ability not only to see the root of my errors, but to visualize them so that they are made plain to me. Your letter is tremendously helpful, and I am taking my time before sending in the next work, as I wish to prove that I am endeavoring to follow your directions. * * *

Your criticism of my papers—prose and verse—is read, and I am making glad haste to tell you of my appreciation of it. You hit me precisely on my high bump of error, however many more there may be in the depressions. * * * Your most fitting help takes hold on me like that of a chum with an arm over my neck helping me out of a hole. Perhaps you will like to know how you cause yourself to appear as a critic. I have contacted some whom I wanted to explode a bomb under, trying a chance at their superiority and massive egotism. * *

I want to thank you for your splendid criticism of * * * Not but what all your criticisms are good, but this one was a little more so. It was more concrete. In fact, I liked it so well that, as you can see, I have incorporated it bodily into the story. * * * I did not feel that I could improve on it. I may not have made the most of your suggestions * * * but I have tried and like it much better. * * *

Your criticism of my * * * reached me this morning. It impresses me as sincere and not of the type that would lead me on to spend money to no purpose by "kidding" me into thinking I could write! * * *

I have been quite pleased with your two letters of criticism. They indicate to me a grasp of the subject that seemed lacking in three other critics that I dealt with. * * *

Your criticism is very illuminating, and will help me not only in writing, but in my lecture work. * * *

A recommendation of my ability and sincere desire to help the student is contained in such letters as the above. However, you can judge better whether I am able to help YOU, by sending a manuscript for criticism. I am glad to answer all reasonable questions in connection with the service.

Willard E. Hawkins,

**Workshop of THE STUDENT-WRITER, 1835 Champa Street,
Denver, Colorado.**